

# ADDRESSING URBAN ISSUES

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A Report on a Community  
Conversation for Chester County's  
Borough & City Council  
Members & Managers

Presented by  
Chester County 2020

Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs

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## ADDRESSING URBAN ISSUES

### Community Conversations and Productive Partnerships

Community Conversations are a hallmark of Chester County 2020's approach to supporting community cooperation at many levels, especially among diverse interests that may not have previously recognized the existence of common ground. A major strength of a Community Conversation is the element of the unexpected that emerges in the findings, conclusions and recommendations. When any number of individuals of varied backgrounds and experience come together, the dynamics are always surprising and productive. The participants in *Addressing Urban Issues* on November 16, 2006 confirmed expectations of shared wisdom, movement toward consensus and the value of dedicating an evening to exploring issues important to the good health of Chester County boroughs and the single city.

As partners, Chester County 2020 and the Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs (PSAB) convened the first of a series of community conversations targeted at expanding communication among the fifteen borough councils and their managers. The meeting offered the benefit of discussing mutual challenges within a single forum. Coatesville's council form of governance made the City a natural participant, filling a place on a team that addressed issues that rarely respect boundaries. The breakout groups were pre-assigned to reflect a mix of experience and representation. This format has proved its value in producing excellent anecdotal response as well as generating thought-provoking ideas.

## Setting the Scene

The tone for the Conversation was provided by presentations by the Chair of the Chester County Commissioners Carol Aichele, Edward Knittel representing PSAB, and Chester County Planning Commission Executive Director Ronald Bailey. Chester County 2020's executive director, Nancy Mohr, opened the conversation and served as the facilitator.

Commissioner Aichele emphasized the importance of the current, ten-year review of *Landscapes*, the county's award winning comprehensive plan. For all that the county's preservation programs, municipalities, land trusts and other non-profit entities have accomplished in contributing to the implementation of *Landscapes*, critical components still remain to be fulfilled; the most significant examples involve affordable housing, infrastructure, transportation, and long-term environmental impacts. Far-reaching concerns relate to the desire to safeguard the county's highly valued quality of life in the context of providing increased services for a rapidly growing population. Since 2000, more than 40,000 new arrivals have taken up residence in the county, considerably ahead of projections and increasing the financial burden for municipalities, the county and school districts. November 2008 is the target date for completion of the review; it is no small task.

Commissioner Aichele introduced Patrick Bokovitz, recently appointed Executive Director of the Chester County Department of Community Development (CCDCD). Patrick's interest in and commitment to workforce housing is well known. Solutions to the scarcity of affordable housing for the entry-level workforce, service employees, teachers, young families and senior citizens are especially important for the more urbanized municipalities. This concern is shared regionally and nationally. The commissioner went on to comment upon the impacts of the growing population including stormwater run-off in the urban centers, an increasingly severe problem tied to new residential and commercial development. County tax increases are clearly tied to the service requirements of this expanding number of residents; equivalent pressures are felt in the school districts. While residential construction consistently represents a tax base shortfall, new corporate facilities improve the tax base -- with the allied consequence of attracting new residents. Commissioner Aichele referenced the contributions of the great Valley Corporate Center, a major player in improving Tredyffrin Township's tax base; she is reminded of the positive side of that development every time she drives south on Route 202. These are complicated dynamics that local government officials face daily as they struggle to create balanced budgets. She also mentioned that the state Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) website is a particularly valuable resource where municipalities may compare their budgets to those of similar size and responsibility.





The commissioner's discussion of population growth necessarily moved into the topic of transportation. There is unquestionably a crisis in mass transit. Funding for expanded routes is not in the near-term picture. The Governor's proposed 1% increase in the transfer tax on real estate sales would heavily impact the Philadelphia five-county region where 46% of the real estate sales statewide occur. Locally, the R-5 SEPTA line is not only the most profitable, but also the route nearby municipalities would like to see improved and extended as far as Atglen. At the same time that an extended R-5 would be desirable, without development of additional funding the Transportation Management Association of Chester County (TMACC) is already faced with the specter of reduced schedules for the popular SCOOT and Coatesville Link buses. In addition, Chester County alone will require \$6.7 billion for road and bridge repair over the next ten years. Information abounds about the transportation needs, but solutions are scarce. All ideas are welcomed.

Edward Knittel's remarks stressed the benefits of consistent communication between the municipalities and PSAB. The organization exists to help the boroughs, but needs to hear from the boroughs more regularly about burdensome economic issues. At both the county and local level, demand for services increases steadily without compensating boosts in revenue. The cost of maintaining a police force provides a dramatic example. Providing police protection may account for as much as 33% of a borough's budget. However, implementing the concept of shared services among neighboring municipalities is one extremely practical way of controlling costs. As these options play a more important role in the financial viability of the boroughs and their neighbors, PSAB feels that frequent gatherings like Addressing Urban Issues can be immensely productive.

Planning Commission Director Ronald Bailey came to Chester County from neighboring Lancaster County where he headed the planning commission for seventeen years. Chester County appealed to him professionally for its challenges as a once rural region under heavy development pressure. In speaking to the Conversation group, Ronald expressed his passion for and belief in the value of local government. In his opinion, boroughs are the hometowns of America, representing diversity of people and activity and possessing a strong sense of place. An absence of sufficient funding creates financial crises that directly affect the boroughs' economic and social health. A good portion of the impact can be attributed to non-contributing development.

According to Bailey, the Landscapes review will necessarily focus on urban planning that in turn directs productive attention to the boroughs and city; solid reinvestment in towns and boroughs is an important Keystone Principle. Consistency in the manner in which the county and the municipalities approach

revitalization represents a significant element for success. Improvement of the transportation infrastructure has the potential to contribute economic strength to the region (and state) by providing access to markets, with broadband supporting access to rural markets.

## Rating the Issues

As the Conversation turned to the significant urban issues that would dominate the evening's discussion, the participants were instructed to indicate five issues they considered most important by placing dots next to each one on a large board (no more than one dot per person, per issue). Municipalities represented in the discussion included Downingtown, Coatesville, S. Coatesville, Malvern, Kennett Square, Phoenixville and West Chester Boroughs, the smaller municipalities of East Bradford, Wallace, and West Marlborough plus the Chester County Planning Commission and the Chester County Department of Community Development. Each issue had its supporters, but four attracted the largest concentration of dots:

1. With land areas in urban centers 95 -100 % developed and real estate taxes increasing, the question was how to increase revenue, how to increase the real estate tax base through dealing with underutilized buildings and land parcels.
2. Scarcity or non-existence of public transportation
3. Impact from development outside corporate boundaries in terms of traffic, storm water, retail competition
4. Rising cost of services: police and safety, health, streets, trash removal

The remaining issues and their ratings appear in the Appendices. The highest ranked topics served as departure points for discussion in each breakout group. The breakout report organization revolves around 1) regional & local trends and their potential impacts on these issues, 2) priority values, 3) important players, 4) opportunities to work together, 5) anticipated accomplishments and benefits, 6) potential barriers and how to deal with them. Substantial common ground evolved around the basic issues, as demonstrated in the breakout group reports.

## Findings

1. **The combination of borough council members and their managers in the same groups generated new ideas and resources to the breakouts.** Although PSAB offers opportunities for Borough Council Members to meet, *Addressing Urban Issues* was a rare opportunity for managers and councils to discuss problems and share ideas for solutions. It is easy (and human nature) to assume opinions about a







given subject, and a welcome surprise to discover that open, candid conversation can produce ideas that go beyond the expected. There are always new horizons to discover and explore.

2. **Boroughs struggle with limited sources of financial support.** Many of the mandates under which they operate severely restrict the ability to be flexible in responding to everyday demands for services. The ability to increase taxes is limited. In a number of instances, the 1% earned income tax that some boroughs have adopted has been reduced by the school district's decision to claim their one-half.
3. **Boroughs (and smaller municipalities, too) persist in looking to the County and government agencies for reasonable solutions to their repetitive challenges.** Unfortunately, the County faces similar problems, on a larger scale but with similar shortages of funding. As the county works through priorities, those of the municipalities inevitably fall lower on the priority list. Government agencies are similarly besieged with requests for help. Do-it-yourself is not a bad approach.
4. **Although borough officials tend to look to the County for assistance in creating an effective, comprehensive program of coordinated purchasing, the most effective initiatives will come from the municipalities themselves.** Taking action at the local level may be challenging but it also eliminates the discomfort of waiting on a list for your turn. "Just do it" may take commitment, focus and even courage, but the rewards will be there. Although the authorization to make cooperative purchases exists, not every municipality has taken advantage of the option. It may be that such opportunities need to be more heavily publicized, expanded to be more comprehensive and distinctly user friendly. The programs exist, but with staff constraints and tight personnel budgets, the necessary research and follow-up may also be in short supply. This is an area where PSAB's Council of Governments support can help initiate positive action.
5. **Shared services appeal for their potential role in cutting costs to the member municipalities.** In exploring the idea of shared services, the discussions did not only address purely emergency services such as police, fire and ambulance. Several borough representatives spoke of the cost of retaining engineers and other specialists, looking for the ability to establish a "time share" basis. A certain comfort level is required to guarantee that sharing will not mean that one

member or another of a “service consortium” comes up short during an emergency – especially if that emergency is regional.

6. **The shortage of funding for a wide range of services is the greatest single concern of borough officials and their managers.** The economic challenges that beset urban centers, include but are not limited to the high demand for police services, infrastructure that needs repair and updating, and the problems of low income families and senior residents on fixed income. The need and cost for these services is steadily escalating. They dictate the urgency of 1) increasing revenues and 2) developing shared solutions where they are practical. Effective cooperation can be measured in dollars saved.
7. **Emphasis was placed on increased attention to storm water management and flooding.** The most recent spring, summer and fall have been characterized by heavy rains. The result when combined with new residential and commercial development – earth-moving and additional impervious coverage – is dramatically increased flooding, especially in already vulnerable areas. The impact was severe for both public infrastructure and private property. Municipal governments fielded countless, often unsolvable, complaints from irate residents. Numerous meetings have been held to address stormwater, to create new control ordinances and to firmly enforce existing regulations. Flooding is not going to go away. It does not respect municipal borders.
8. **There tends to be too little regular communication, one borough with another.** If *Addressing Urban Issues* can be considered a valid model, borough officials are mutually responsive when they are given the opportunity to discuss common problems.
9. **Closing neighborhood schools and moving to new schools beyond the borough borders is viewed as detrimental to the urban quality of life and economy.** Schools, school children and their families contribute to the vitality of a community. According to borough representatives, moving them beyond the borders tends to reduce the daily involvement and contributions to the economic picture in the urban center. Dependence upon busing also reduces students’ sense of independence and their place in the diverse community.
10. **There is uncertainty as to how to move the regional cooperation process forward.** It is one thing to talk “regional” and quite another to jump-start the process.





## Common Ground in Requesting Action

The reports uncovered considerable common ground:

### Most frequently mentioned

- Desire for regional cooperation at many levels, including proactive planning
- The critical need to relate the tax base to cost of services if urban centers are to survive.
- The conviction that taxing flexibility (there was no adequate definition of “taxing flexibility”) can contribute to self-sustaining municipalities.

### Transportation

- Coalitions around transportation needs are critical.
- Public transportation is an important component of livable communities and economic growth.
- Extension of the SEPTA R-5 is important to the economic health of the Western Chester County Region, an important tool in curbing sprawl as well as in revitalizing Coatesville and the other urban centers.
- Development of the means of convincing SEPTA and the necessary funding sources of the need for public transportation through a demonstration project attracted high interest. Sources for funding the project must be identified.

### Shared Services

- The need for a broad menu of potential shared services
- Shared services can be cost effective for both large and small municipalities.

### Communication

- Better communication is worth the effort.
- Livable communities benefit from effective communication.

### Recommendations/Action Items

1. That PSAB and Chester County 2020 help develop a schedule of Conversations to help strengthen the cooperation among the boroughs, making an effort to recruit those that did not send participants to the first session. Community Conversations can serve as a tangible step in establishing productive regional cooperation. The needs have been identified; the next step is to develop and implement specific solutions. For instance, the next Conversation might well develop a set of work programs, with the boroughs setting the priorities for goals and accomplishments. Continuity and consistency can make a huge difference.
2. With the support of the Commissioners, identify and enlist appropriate County staff to assist PSAB and municipal representatives in expanding the existing system for cooperative purchasing of supplies. Existing resources should



be explored including Councils of Governments, with which PSAB is familiar.

3. Develop incentives for well-planned sustainable development that strengthens the urban core. Ask for assistance from the CCPC.
4. Undertake a cooperative effort to learn more about the process of developing support for projects – with the support of volunteers or consultants who know the ropes. Gaining funding is not just a matter of going to a legislator or the county with a wish list. Preparation pays off.
5. Support the schools. Encourage respect for and involvement in education through after-school programs and enrichment opportunities. The major key to a sustainable community is a good educational system; the teachers can't do it all.
6. Check out the report of the Transportation Funding and Reform Commission ([www.dot.state.pa.us](http://www.dot.state.pa.us) website) to understand the complexities of funding issues for Pennsylvania transportation. Appreciation of the current state of funding is important to any solution, no matter how creative or valid.
7. Bond together – local governments, county, businesses, developers and residents – to form a transportation coalition. Research the potential for a demonstration project re increased service and extension of the R-5 SEPTA line. The developers in the urban centers will benefit from better transportation; enlist them for your team. “Demonstrating” means producing evidence to support the idea that investment will pay off in increased ridership, not just a shift from Downingtown and Thorndale to the outlying stations of Coatesville, Parkesburg and Atglen. Challenges, but well worth investigating.
8. Create a sustainable/cooperative community theme, apply for funding, and launch an educational campaign. Search out a top advertising agency; ask them to provide pro bono assistance.
9. As obvious as this may seem, go back to the comprehensive plan. It should be the guide for daily decisions regarding services and land development and the need for regulatory consistency. Identify ordinance standards that are not consistent and help zoning hearing boards assess demonstrated hardships in granting variances.
10. Above all, don't wait. Progress benefits dramatically from





teamwork. Chester County has fifteen boroughs and one city, all of them capable of hitting home runs.

*Addressing Urban Issues* was a splendid beginning, establishing a good foundation upon which to build. We thank you for your involvement and look forward to additional Community Conversations. Questions and comments may be addressed to all or any one of us.

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## APPENDICES

- I. Complete listing of Issues and their Rankings
- II. Full Listing of Breakout Comments Addressing the Challenges of Establishing Sustainable Urban Centers
- III. Resources Recommended by PSAB

### APPENDIX I

#### Complete listing of Issues and their Rankings

1. Tax base: with land areas 95 -100 % developed and real estate taxes increasing,  
How to increase revenue, how to increase real estate tax base through identifying underutilized buildings and land parcels.
2. Lack of public transportation
3. Impact from development outside corporate boundaries in terms of traffic, storm water, retail competition.
4. Rising cost of services: police and safety, health, streets, trash removal
5. Sharing municipal services on an area-wide basis
6. Inconsistency among planning documents, internal and with adjoining municipalities
7. Loss of function and purpose: no longer the prime service and retail center for the surrounding area.
8. Unnecessary traffic, through traffic on main streets:  
State Street in Kennett Square  
Route 23 in Phoenixville  
Route 322 in Downingtown  
Route 52 and Route 3 in West Chester  
Route 322 and 10 in Honey Brook  
Route 41 in Avondale
9. Old systems for water service and sewerage translate into high maintenance costs and replacement costs
10. Difficult to get residents to fill positions on boards, commissions and elected offices
11. Change in population:  
Total, characteristics, economic levels, education levels, integrating new populations into community activities
12. Lack of traffic control; traffic congestion on main retail streets, CBD area, service vehicles double parking, lack of rear area service accessibility
13. Air pollution
14. Lack of urban planning
15. Residential conversions to multi family units, to non-residential uses
16. Inadequate provisions for response to parking needs
17. Changing character of the residential neighborhoods
18. Loss of historic character, or changing character
19. Substandard housing





20. Lack of trained members on boards, commissions and authorities
21. Loss of neighborhood schools from urban centers
22. Loss of low to moderate housing
23. Out-dated plans and ordinances
24. Second and third floor vacancies,

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Full Listing of Breakout Comments Addressing the Challenges of Establishing Sustainable Urban Centers**

#### **Regional & local trends and their potential impacts:**

- Developers create consequences for which they don't bear a fair share of cost.
- Sewer capacity and infrastructure costs are too heavy for existing communities.
- Growth in surrounding areas contributes to costs in urban areas without financial support.
- Tax system does not permit local government to connect economic development with tax revenue. (Critical need for more flexible taxing capabilities for local governments.)
- Need to service growing population
- Need to promote opportunity and growth of boroughs
- Higher service costs – rising faster than tax base
- Absence and loss of public transportation translates into negative impacts for low income people, senior citizens and temporary layoffs.
- Needed – shared regionalization of services and purchasing
- Too little foresight in planning. Forced into the reactive mode, the band-aids are not effective enough.

#### **Priority values**

- Maintain and improve services in balance with taxes and service fees.
- Keep people in the boroughs by providing services and affordability.
- Long term financial health of home towns
- To exist as self-sustaining communities
- Local control
- Empowering local government to deal with local needs
- Fairness
- Pride
- Collaboration
- Better service for less cost
- Quality community development

#### **Important Players**

- Residents and their families

- Boroughs and city governments
- County government
- Neighboring municipalities
- County/State/Federal Agencies
- Economic development organizations (CCEDC, Chamber of Business & Industry, merchants and business associations)
- Transportation authority and providers

### **Ways to work together**

- Regional sharing through policy and personal relationships (If it can work for corruption, it can work for us!)
- Collaborate around specific actions/needs.
- Share information.
- Provide research to energize groups of concerned communities in pressuring transportation entities.  
Work up a funding proposal for a trial run to demonstrate potential usage.
- Explore the possibility of the County serving as umbrella for some services.
- Similar municipalities should be discussing needs in common.
- Formalize communication with neighboring municipalities.
- Improve overall planning through effective regional cooperation.

### **Anticipated accomplishments and benefits.**

- Long-term, livable, affordable home towns
- More livable, self-sustaining communities
- Establishing a more efficient, appealing transportation system will support better planning in neighboring communities for future growth
- More services at less cost
- Better communication
- Better transportation will result in less congestion and more state aid.

### **Anticipated barriers and how to deal with them**

#### **Barriers**

- Development pressures are essentially “reverse eminent domain.”
- Development in the wrong place produces a public non-benefit.
- Pennsylvania taxing structure. Only the General Assembly can solve this one.
- Haven’t done it before (not in the mode). Defeatist attitude.
- Firefighting issues vs. proactive planning (proactive vs. reactive)
- Federal and State distribution of funding.







#### How to deal

- Communicate!
- More collaboration among municipalities will provide a “common front.”
- Just do it! Stop waiting for someone else to come up with the solution.
- Try cooperation instead of competition.
- We are stronger together.

#### **Unresolved differences.**

How to begin moving the regional process forward.

### **APPENDIX III**

#### **Resources Recommended by PSAB**

Grants & Funding sources: [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov);  
[www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org)

The Urban Institute: [www.urban.org](http://www.urban.org)

Pa. Department of Community and Economic Development:  
[www.newpa.com](http://www.newpa.com)

National Association of Realtors: <http://www.realtor.org>

Smart Growth: [www.smartgrowthpa.org](http://www.smartgrowthpa.org)

National Association of Home Builders: [www.nahb.org](http://www.nahb.org)

Sustainable Communities Network: [www.sustainable.org](http://www.sustainable.org)

New Urban News: [www.newurbannews.com](http://www.newurbannews.com)

The Mayors' Institute on City Design: [www.micd.org](http://www.micd.org)

Congress for the New Urbanism: [www.cnu.org](http://www.cnu.org)

Storm water assistances, The Environmental Finance Center:  
[www.efc.umd.edu](http://www.efc.umd.edu)

US Environmental Protection Agency: [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs: [www.boroughs.org](http://www.boroughs.org)

The Center for the Study of Economics: [www.urbantools.net](http://www.urbantools.net)

Pennsylvania Council of Governments: [www.PACOG.com](http://www.PACOG.com)





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